

Reflections on Georgetown University's Democracy and Governance MA Program

DANIEL BRUMBERG

The genesis and evolution of Georgetown University's Democracy and Governance [MA Program](#) reflects the trajectory of political change in the US and wider global arena over the last sixteen years. When the program was established in Fall 2006 the world was riding the crest of what seemed like a global democratic wave. The optimism spawned by this dynamic was captured in [Francis Fukuyama's](#) *The End of History*. This book took implicit inspiration in Karl Marx's prediction that one day there would be a victorious class that spoke for humanity itself. The difference, of course, was that it was the middle class, rather than the workers, that was presumably emerging to bear this universal if still unfolding mission during the second decade of the new millennia.

This confidence in the assumed arc of history was reflected—in a prudent way—in our curriculum, which focused on topics such as political development and democratic transitions. Hailing from the US, South America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia, for the most part, our students [pursued careers](#) in democracy assistance and human rights rather than in the challenging art (and science) of managing existing democracies. The absence of any reference in the original title of our MA program to “governance” was hardly coincidental: the prevailing assumption in a democracy field that was only beginning to professionalize was that once a transition had succeeded and democratic consolidation was well underway, governance would follow suit. The key task was to help political leaders, civil society social activists and leaders abroad grapple—and perhaps negotiate—with autocratic regimes in ways that would put these countries on a democratic path. Our program thus focused on giving our students the education, training and experience they needed to partner with NGO and governmental institutions in the US and abroad to advance democratic change. This focus on transitions underscored the a widely shared view that while the road ahead was surely difficult, it nevertheless pointed to a democratic future.

That said, this focus did not translate into any effort on my part, or that of [Steven Heydemann](#)—the co-founder of the MA program—to imbue the MA with an ideological message. Our concern for a principled and rigorous objectivity was shared by our second co-director, Professor Samuel Mujal Leon, and by our successive associate directors, Barak Hoffman, [Yonatan Morse](#), and [Jennifer Dresden](#) all of whom played vital roles in the success of this MA program.

I shared with Heydemann an especially strong allergy to political preaching, a perspective that probably owes much to the fact that we were both students of autocracy in the Middle East. Imbued with a keen conceptual and empirical

grasp of the tenacity of regimes and the geo-strategic realities that support autocracies— not least of which are from outside powers including the United States— we created a program that emphasizes the social, economic, institutional, and identity based obstacles to democratic change while also highlighting strategies that activists might deploy to dent or erode the armor of autocracy. To find the sweet spot between realism and aspiration was our basic goal. In this spirit we forged close working relationships with a myriad of Washington-based NGOs, official US agencies, and private sector firms, including the [National Endowment for Democracy](#), the [National Democratic Institute](#), the [International Republican Institute](#), [Freedom House](#), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) [Democracy Program](#), and the Department of State's [Bureau of Democracy, Labor and Human Rights](#), [Democracy International](#).

If these partnerships reflected the MA's practical ethos, they went hand in hand with a focus on theory and conceptualization which was rooted in the fact that the MA in fact grew out of a PhD program in the Department of Government. From the outset we believed in and still try to realize the department's unofficial motto, which is to link theory and practice.

It is precisely with this idea in mind that over the ensuing years we revised its analytical and practical contours to reflect the changing landscape of national and international politics. This involved adding more practice-oriented classes in topics such as policy and proposal writing, election observing, and program monitoring and evaluation. On a wider plane, we began to highlight classes on topics related to governance—hence the change in the name of the program adopted in 2012. With the support of the wider university and many GU programs and centers, we also encouraged our students to take classes on critical topics such as market reforms, transforming security sectors, and judicial or constitutional politics. And with the proliferation of hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes around the world, we emphasized the many challenges posed by what Thomas Carothers once called the “grey zone” of political change.

Indeed, the resurgence of autocracy during the mid and late 2010s provided a leitmotif for transformation of our program that is still ongoing today. Three related developments were central to this change. First, the emergence of a multi-polar global order gave aspiring autocrats greater room for maneuver, even as this rise of a “market place” of competing states also created openings for new democratic leaders to work with Western democracy assistance organizations. Second, the shifting world order also created op-

opportunities for Russia and especially China to compete with and challenge Western democracies, assert their military and economic power, and cooperate in ways designed to deflect internal and external democratic challenges. Seeking to address these dynamics, I offered a new course on Global Autocracy that highlighted the complex interaction between national level political change and international politics. Echoing this focus on international relations, many of our students took courses in subject such as international security, migration, and foreign policy in Russia, China, the US, and other states.

The third and perhaps most important development that shaped our program was the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the associated rise of populist nationalist movements and leaders in the US and other Western democracies. These developments not only placed the threat of “democratic backsliding” at the center of US politics: they also showed that the empirical and conceptual wall between the study of US politics and the politics of the wider global arena was increasingly an outdated if porous artifice, one that no longer captured the complex if shared challenges facing democracies in the West, in Eastern Europe, and the so-called developing world. With the very notion of “American exceptionalism” — or for that matter, the notion of any kind of unchanging, one dimensional national level exceptionalism — up for grabs, we began to retool our own teaching of democratization.

This shift was reflected in a set of innovative initiatives focusing on polarization in the US. These efforts highlighted grassroots strategies for countering or mitigating polarization: practice oriented and experiential, this work took the education process outside of the classroom by rooting it in the lived context of young people grappling across the ideological, social, cultural and ideological divides that have emerged in the US.

The first of these efforts began in the 2018-19 academic year, when our MA program joined with GU’s Laboratory for [Global Performance and Politics](#), its co-director, [Derek Goldman](#), and [Patrick Henry College](#)—a small, conservative Christian college outside Leesburg, Virginia — to shape a project that we called *In Your Shoes*. Using performance, dialogue and narrative strategies rooted in theater, the project challenged students from both schools to grapple with themes such as home, belief, friendship and community by telling stories about their own lives, and then having their counterparts perform these narratives and thus “step into their shoes.” The following academic year we offered a formal, 3 credit course based on this initial experiment that also involved students from both campuses. Conducted mostly online, the course was recognized by GU when it received the “Provost’s Innovative Teaching Award,” and got national attention when it was covered by [PBS’s News Hour](#).

Needless to say, the January 6, 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol provided fresh impetus to widen our work on polarization. In the wake of this shocking event, we organized a third on-line *In Your Shoes* program that involved

both students and faculty from GU. And in Spring 2022 I joined with our new Associate Director (and now Director) Elton Skendaj to do a course on “Countering Polarization,” half of which featured speakers from US based NGOs and programs, in class exercises (including an *In Your Shoes* segment) and a guest lecture by Professor [Larry Diamond](#), who addressed a range of ongoing initiatives as well as the difficult question of electoral reform in the US.

While these efforts emphasize experiential education, they are fully in line with our long-standing quest to link theory and practice. The important, if sometimes tricky, task here is to sustain our focus on rigorous, objective analysis even as we grapple with contentious political issues that affect our personal, family and professional lives, thus implicating us in a political world from which we cannot and should not disengage.

As our MA program evolves and tries to meet the opportunities and challenges of engaged analysis, we are also determined to expand our teaching on global affairs, and to sustain within this framework grassroots work abroad. This is no small goal for a small program, but one that we plunged into three years ago with a summer program that brought 11 of our students to Tunisia, where they met with political leaders, policy makers, social activists and scholars to discuss the challenges of democratic consolidation. We hope to renew this effort, although given events in that country, a new version of this class will probably focus on problems of democratic backsliding. We are also looking at potential partnerships with other overseas universities, including the Catholic University of Portugal’s [Democracy Program](#). We will also endeavor to open up opportunities for our students to participate in other hands-on field work, such as election observation, NGO support and program evaluation.

Professor Elton Skendaj is already doing a superb job leading these efforts and expanding the horizons of our MA. His experience growing up, pursuing studies and working in his native Albania and other European countries, and his previous work on the nexus of democratic and conflict resolution (including his own experience using theater and performance to foster dialogue) will be critical to advancing what remains the only MA program of its kind in the US. Joining with our colleagues in the American Politics and Conflict Resolution MA programs—and with a range of DC partners in the NGO world and in government—he will help students build careers that I am sure will make a real and positive difference in the lives of others, whether in the US or the wider global community.

As for me, in my new role as MA Senior Advisor, I look forward to working with Elton and our students in a range of activities including our polarization work and overseas programs. I also look forward to anchoring our new gateway course in our core curriculum, and in supporting the wide range of classes that animate our program, not a few of which are taught by our talented adjunct faculty colleagues, all of whom have brought their experience and insights to

the classroom. A program of this kind is a collaborative endeavor that draws insights, inspiration and support from many arenas and institutions in GU, in DC and beyond— not least of which is the Department of Government, whose successive chairs and remarkable faculty have supported our MA in so many ways.